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# State of the Field

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## **National Council for Public History: Challenging the Exclusive Past**

Baltimore, Maryland. March 16-19, 2016

By Blanca Garcia-Barron

In April 2015, local Baltimore residents and social justice activists challenged Baltimore authorities when police took a local resident, Freddie Gray, into custody. The video of his arrest went viral on the internet after Gray fell into a coma as a result of the injuries he sustained during his arrest. On April 19, 2015, Gray died of a spinal injury. Gray, along with Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, and Eric Garner, joined the list of unarmed African-American citizens who died at the hands of police in recent years. Following Gray's coma and death, local residents wanted answers and accountability for what they felt represented an ongoing problem of police brutality and abuse of power. Activists came to Baltimore to bring national attention to Gray's death. Protests began on April 18<sup>th</sup> and continued days after Gray's death. The representation of the protests by television media portrayed the unrest as violent and chaotic. President Barack Obama called the isolated acts of violence during the protests as the work of criminals and thugs. Yet, he pointed out the media's failure to acknowledge those who were committed to positive change and dialogue.

Similar to the unrest of 2015, the Baltimore riots of 1968 following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., characterized Baltimore's African-American community as violent. Images used to describe the events told a destructive narrative. The aftermath of the riots caused \$12 million in damages to both public and private properties.<sup>1</sup> Both events pose two critical

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<sup>1</sup> Police Department, City of Baltimore, Maryland, "1968 Riots," <http://archives.ubalt.edu/bsr/archival-resources/documents/baltimore-police-reports.pdf>.

questions – who tells the narrative, and how is that narrative written?

As Baltimore is only thirty-five miles south of the Mason-Dixon Line, and is considered the northernmost city in the South, the clash between public and historical memory has intensified. Like most cities in the South, monuments to confederate memory most notably characterize the exclusive history and past of Baltimore. In recent years, Baltimore and communities throughout the South have begun to contest these exclusive narratives. For example, following the unrest surrounding Freddie Gray's death, social media changed the way community members and activists chronicled the event. Much like the Arab Spring in Egypt and Tunisia, images and information during the 2015 Baltimore uprising were disseminated on social media platforms like Twitter. In the local Mt. Vernon community of Baltimore, residents began a fundraiser to construct a monument to the actress and gay icon, Divine. The effects of the 1968 riot are still being explored and challenged in a variety of ways that had not been done before. The use of oral history methods offers different perspectives on the events of 1968.<sup>2</sup> These efforts challenge the dominant narratives and shift the power of whom and how they are written, constructed, and told.

Amid these contested memories, Baltimore, Maryland served as the setting for this year's conference for the National Council on Public History (NCPH). The majority of sessions, discussions, and poster presentations were connected by this year's theme – "Challenging the Exclusive Past." Although Baltimore was selected three years in advance, with no way of knowing that the conference would follow just a year after Baltimore became the center of national attention once again (much as it had in 1968), the combined history and recent events made the city an ideal location for a conference organized around this theme. Over the course of four days, conference attendees participated in workshops, networked, and went on tours. Sessions provided attendees an opportunity to hear about various public, oral, and digital history projects from around the country.

Ideas, minds, and challenges all convened at the Public Plenary – *The Uprising in Focus: The Image, Experience, and*

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<sup>2</sup> Jessica Elfenbein, Elizabeth Nix, and Thomas Hollowak, eds., *Baltimore '68: Riots and Rebirth in an American City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

*History of Inequality in Baltimore* on Friday March 18<sup>th</sup>, hosted at the Ebenezer AME Church. Elizabeth Nix, Assistant Professor of History at the University of Baltimore, moderated the plenary. The panelists included Devin Allen, a local photographer whose work on the Baltimore uprisings of 2015 was featured on the cover of *TIME* magazine. J.M Giordano is a local photojournalist and Al-Jazeera contributor who covered the 2015 uprisings. Paulo Gregory Harris is a local community member and director of the Ingoma Foundation who had been concerned about the contentious relationship between the community and the police force before the uprisings. The panel also featured Devon Wilford-Said who in 1968, at fourteen years old, experienced the unrest firsthand. Finally, Robert Birt, a philosophy professor, who also shared his experience about the 1968 unrests in Baltimore.

The plenary conjured up echoes and memories that transcended Baltimore history. The issues that occurred in 1968 and 2015 share the unjust representation of a community by a mainstream majority that ignored their narratives and experiences. Both events had different circumstances, yet the causes of civil unrest and discontent have remained the same. The 1968 riots were triggered by the assassination of King, but in official state reports, the unrest had its foundations in the discrimination, poverty, and unemployment that plagued the African-American community.<sup>3</sup> The trigger for the 2015 uprising laid in Gray's death, but the history of discrimination and poverty in Baltimore affected the unrest as it did in 1968. Unlike the riots of 1968, the 2015 uprising became chronicled immediately. Platforms like Twitter provided an initial archive, but soon after the unrest, the website, [www.baltimoreuprising2015.org](http://www.baltimoreuprising2015.org), served as digital repository and archive. The website aims to preserve the multiple perspectives of the complex narrative that occurred in April 2015.

Devin Allen, who had no professional experience prior to the uprisings, photographed the events from his perspectives. Being a local, he knew the frustrations of the community and he experienced the abuse of power by authorities. Some of his photographs of the events were ultimately published by *TIME* magazine. His testimony, along with the other community panelists provided the perspectives of complex historical memories. These

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<sup>3</sup> Police Department, City of Baltimore, Maryland, "1968 Riots," <http://archives.ubalt.edu/bsr/archival-resources/documents/baltimore-civil-disturbances.pdf>.

crucial dialogues were indicative of the conferences' themes, as they challenged privilege and exclusive narratives.

Sessions like, "Not Lost and Not Forgotten: How to Help Cultural Communities Preserve Their Sacred Traditions and Sacred Spaces," facilitated by Marian Carpenter of the Delaware Historical & Cultural Affairs, followed the plenary's idea of letting the community speak for itself. The project presented involved the preservation of the musical traditions of the African American singing and praying bands of Maryland and Delaware through oral history and archive methods while addressing the challenge of the oral historian as an "outsider." The session brought in the actual singing and praying band of Maryland. Headed by Pastor Jerry Colbert, the praying band, made up of 15-20 men and women, passionately sang one of their prayer songs. Pastor Colbert and panelist, Anthony Johnson, headed the roundtable discussion after the presentation. The panelists emphasized that the prayer band were not performers, but rather they interpreted themselves as being living history.

"After Charleston: Exploring the Fate of Confederate Monuments in America" used the recent controversies surrounding the calls to take down confederate monuments. The panelists explored possible solutions and middle ground that could ease the heightened emotions brought on by the complex memories of the monuments. Session attendees publicly noted that the session was problematic. Some felt as though the underlying issue of race had been completely ignored. Others called for a complete destruction of confederate monuments. One attendee posed the issue of an all-white panel addressing a predominantly white audience. The session proved to be a clash of ideas, political aims, and even perhaps generational shifts within the field. It further revealed that solutions to the controversies of confederate monuments remain stagnant due to the complex emotions and ideas that such dialogues invoke.

The issue of race raised at the confederate monument session did bring up an important question at the conference – how does the public history field address the issues of underrepresentation of marginalized groups? To work with underrepresented communities, public and oral historians must be careful in how they exhibit or write the narratives of those communities. Trust is most often a primary component and must be established between historians and communities before a project

begins. However, that leaves the question – how does the field address underrepresentation from within?

In 2008, the NCPH conducted a survey of public history professionals. From the 3,800 participants, 88.5% identified as white, 7% self-identified “of color” (a term that encompassed Native-American, Hispanic/Latino, Asian or Pacific Islander, Black, and Multiracial), 4.5% did not choose to answer.<sup>4</sup> Because of the stark lack of racial diversity in the profession, a working group formed, titled “How Do We Get There? Racial and Ethnic Diversity in the Public History Profession,” organized by Modupe Labode, Assistant Professor of History and Museum Studies at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, and Calinda Lee, historian at the Atlanta History Center. The group set out to discuss possible solutions to the lack of diversity within the field, such as scholarships for students to attend annual NCPH meetings and maintaining relationships with other organizations and their approach to diversity. The most important solution proposed was that of the NCPH taking an active role in supporting and sustaining diversity initiatives.<sup>5</sup> This focus is evident in many of the post-2008 survey conference themes, such as “Crossing Borders/Building Communities” in 2011 and “History on the Edge” in 2015.

Most importantly, the NCPH remained committed to finding solutions to the issue by supporting the ad-hoc committee, Diversity Task Force, which formed in 2015. The task force is co-chaired by Brian Joyner of the National Park Service and Kristine Navarro-McElhaney of Arizona State University. Its other members include Modupe Labode, Alima Bucciantini of Duquesne University, Mary Rizzo of Rutgers University-Newark, Kathleen Franz of the National Museum of American History, Aleia Brown of Middle Tennessee State University, and myself. The task force aimed to challenge issues of representation that go beyond issues of race. The broad term “diversity” encompasses gender, disabilities, identity, race and sexuality. Initially, the goals of the task force aimed to remedy the issue of underrepresented groups within the field by promoting discussions surrounding the issue.

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<sup>4</sup> NCPH, “A Picture of Public History Preliminary Results from the 2008 Survey of Public History Professionals,” *Public History News* 29, no. 4 (Sept. 2009): 1-20, <http://ncph.org/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/2009-September-Newsletter-Compressed.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

As discussions and inclusive conference themes proved to not be enough, the task force organized an “un-conference” in Baltimore. The un-conference was scheduled at the Teavolve restaurant in the Fells Point area near the Inner Harbor, and served as a relaxed way to network with other conference attendees who were committed to the same issues. Attendees who identified as members of marginalized groups, and/or of color, were able to share more than just ideas on how to rectify the issue. They were able to connect with one another based upon shared experiences. From isolation to tokenism, graduate students, professionals, and scholars found a safe and open space at the un-conference to bring forth underlying issues of race, exclusivity, and privilege that affect the field.

The task force also organized a social media component to the discussions taking place at the conference. To amplify the goals and discussions of the task force, Aleia Brown hosted a twitter chat on Thursday March 17<sup>th</sup>.<sup>6</sup> The twitter chat, #HistoryinMyImage, kept those who could not attend the conference included in the conversations. Attendees and those at home could also join twitter conversations about conference sessions. Twitter has proven to be a powerful digital tool for the NCPH. It not only keeps graduate students and professionals connected, but the dissemination of information and ideas between emerging and established scholars keeps dialogues open, transparent, and active.

The panel that I facilitated, “Public Historians of Color: Challenging the Profession,” alongside my fellow panel participants Camille Bethune-Brown of the American University, Ashley Bouknight of The Hermitage: Home of Andrew Jackson, Amber Mitchell of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis, and LaQuanda Walters Cooper of the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, also became archived on the *Storify* platform.<sup>7</sup> The panel continued the conversation that Labode and Lee had started at the 2009 conference. It confronted the issues of graduate student recruitment and its practices, rethinking the public history “pipeline,” and diversifying the established public history

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<sup>6</sup> “#HistoryInMyImage Twitter Chat (with Images, Tweets) - BetterGuyX,” *Storify*, <https://storify.com/BetterGuyX/getting-started>.

<sup>7</sup> “Public Historians of Color #s29 #NCPH2016 (with Images, Tweets) - Anichellemitch,” *Storify*, <https://storify.com/anichellemitch/public-historians-of-color-s29-ncp2016>.

literature to include historians and scholars that write on or identify as members of marginalized communities specifically.

As an undergraduate student, facilitating the panel was a nerve-wracking experience. As a future scholar, however, it proved to be a positive and rewarding introduction into the field. I am not only in debt to the valuable connections I made at last year's conference in Nashville, but my public history preparation also contributed to my determination in putting this panel together. Since being introduced to the study at the undergraduate level, it has exposed me to various options within and outside the field. It has taught me practical skills such as grant writing, and introduced me to project management. Most importantly, it gave me the confidence to openly discuss issues concerning race and identity and how they intersect with our academics, our work, and our projects.

This year's NCPH conference provided valuable platforms for different groups, people, and ideas. Diversity, representation, and contested memories are issues that, like confederate monuments, will not be resolved easily or soon. It is a gradual and ongoing process that can only succeed with proactive efforts of NCPH members. Assembling groups like the Diversity Task Force is one approach, and being inclusive of diverse projects and themes is a step in the right direction for the council. Public historians often commit themselves to public causes and shared authority; this year's conference proved true to that spirit.



***Author Bio***

Currently, Blanca Garcia-Barron is a public and oral history major, and is finishing her last quarter at CSUSB. In the fall of 2016, Blanca will begin a doctorate program at the University of Texas, El Paso. UTEP's unique concentration in the history of the U.S. Borderlands will offer Blanca an opportunity to continue her research in local and national Mexican-American history, social movements, and community formation. Blanca's studies at CSUSB were integral in preparing her to advance to not only graduate study, but doctorate level studies as well.

